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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1995
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON PRIORITY 2779
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000213

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/PB, SCA/FO, CA/OCS, AND DS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/01/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [ASEC](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER MEETS ARMY OFFICERS IN BID TO QUELL
ANGER OVER HANDLING OF MUTINY

REF: A. DHAKA 210

[B](#). DHAKA 207

[C](#). DHAKA 204

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#). (C) In a tense meeting with seething military personnel on 3/1, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina defended her Government's handling of the border-guard rebellion that left scores of army officers massacred. Initial reports suggested emotions ran high among soldiers who felt the Government should have moved more quickly to quell the rebellion. Further raising the political temperature was a statement from the main opposition party raising sharp questions about the Government response to the uprising. The calls for national unity that strongly resonated in the early hours of the crisis do not appear to have trumped partisan politics or the army's thirst for revenge. As of 1700 local time, the political aftermath of the rebellion remained fluid.

HASINA'S HIGH-RISK MEETING WITH THE ARMY

[2](#). (C) Three days after her Government quelled the Bangladesh Rifles mutiny, Hasina spoke before about 500 army officers still livid over the massacre of their colleagues at the hands of paramilitary border guard troops. (Note: Bangladesh Rifles rank-and-file are commanded by army officers. End note.) The army officers believed Hasina should have immediately ordered an army attack on the rebels instead of offering a general amnesty and expressing support for their grievances about pay, benefits and alleged corruption among the Bangladesh Rifles' army leadership. Most of the casualties occurred at the beginning of the insurrection, and Hasina has been credited by local media and the international community for avoiding further bloodshed (reftels).

[3](#). (C) Hasina decided to face the army officers after a number of other steps -- including formation of a special tribunal to immediately try rebels suspected of the murders, formation of a committee to investigate the mutiny, and cash grants to the survivors of the slain -- failed to calm the cantonment. (Note: Hasina's security adviser, Major General (retired) Tarique Ahmed Siddique, told EmbOff her Cabinet recommended she not attend the meeting. End note.) Accompanied by Tarique and Agriculture Minister Matia

Chowdhury, both of whom are close confidantes, Hasina met about 500 officers for two-and-a-half hours behind closed doors and reportedly was subject to repeated verbal abuse. Tarique said he recognized many die-hard anti-Awami League officers among the crowd, many of whom appeared to be drawing from "talking points" in the session with Hasina. He said after an extremely hot exchange, the meeting ended more calmly after the recitation of prayers. Still, he said he was surprised she was not harmed.

¶4. (C) Although the meeting was closed to media, several sources said some officers demanded the removal of two senior government officials who led the negotiations with Bangladesh Rifles rebels, Home Affairs Minister Sahara Khatun and Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives State Minister Jahangir Kabir Nanak. Some particularly agitated officers reportedly broke chairs and hit their heads against the wall during the meeting. Others reportedly demanded that BDR rebels' trials convene immediately and those found guilty of murder be hanged in public.

PARTISAN POLITICS STOKES UP

¶5. (C) After initially vowing support for the Government, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party led by Hasina's political arch-rival, Khaleda Zia, on 2/28 took a much more partisan position. While its Standing Committee issued a statement urging patience, peace and unity, a separate statement from its office secretary blamed the Government for making the situation "more complex." It went on to say the Government

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"could not take timely steps to prevent the killings of army officers and their family members" and the torture of women and children who lived on the Bangladesh Rifles compound where the rebellion broke out.

¶6. (C) Further roiling the waters was a rumor mill working overtime on theories of who was behind the rebellion. Indian media, for example, reported that senior BNP politician S.Q. Chowdhury financed the mutineers. Bangladeshi media quoted the head of Jamaat-e-Islami, the nation's largest Islamist political party and a BNP ally during the Parliamentary elections in December, as denying any links to the mutiny. Awami League spokesman Syed Ashraful Islam, one of the party's most moderate voices, told reporters the Government had evidence indicating unnamed outsiders were involved in the mutiny. The BNP, meanwhile, said some of those who assisted the rebels had links to the Awami League government.

DEATH TOLL APPROACHING 100; AWOL BDR TROOPS RETURN

¶7. (C) Morning newspapers on 3/1 put the death toll at more than 70, with 72 army officers believed still missing. There were few reports of more bodies unearthed as of 1600 local time. Meanwhile, Bangladesh Rifles soldiers began returning to the Bangladesh Rifles Headquarters in central Dhaka. In response to a 24-hour ultimatum issued on 2/28 to return to their posts, up to 2,000 Bangladesh Rifles soldiers reportedly returned to Headquarters; those in uniform were allowed inside the compound, while those in civilian dress were taken to a nearby temporary army camp. A second funeral for slain army officers, originally scheduled for 2/28, was again postponed until the morning of 3/2. Media also reported initial charges filed against five named and 1,000 unnamed conspirators in the rebellion. (Note: Unnamed conspirators are used as a legal placeholder during investigations when the names of suspects are not yet known. End note.)

CONCLUSION: MANAGING THE AFTERMATH

18. (C) The next 24 hours should be crucial in determining whether Hasina's gutsy decision to meet army officers will diffuse their anger and desire to seek revenge against rebels and the government and military officials whom they believe acted too slowly to quell the mutiny. Even should the cantonment fury be contained, a partisan free-for-all appears increasingly likely as parties try to score political points from the tragedy. The USG can play an important role in calming the waters by providing technical assistance to ensure the integrity of both the official enquiry into the rebellion and the trials of suspected ringleaders. In her telephone conversation with Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher in the morning of 3/1 local time, Hasina indicated that requests for such help might be forthcoming.
MORIARTY